

# Reich

This article is about the German word **Reich**, and in particular its historical and political implications. For other uses, see **Reich** (disambiguation).

**Reich** (/ˈraɪk/<sup>[1]</sup> German: [ˈʁaɪç]) is a German word literally meaning "realm". The terms *Kaiserreich* (literally "realm of an emperor") and *Königreich* (literally "realm of a king") are used in German to refer to **empires** and **kingdoms** respectively.

As such, the term *Deutsches Reich* (often translated to "German Empire") continued to be used even after the collapse of the German Empire and abolition of the monarchy in 1918, without any imperial connotations.

The term derives from the **Germanic** word meaning "realm" in general, but is typically used in German to designate a **kingdom** or an empire, especially the **Roman Empire**.<sup>[2]</sup> The terms *Kaisertum* (roughly "Emperordom") and *Kaiserreich* are used in German to more specifically define an empire ruled by an emperor.<sup>[2]</sup>

*Reich* is comparable in meaning and development (as well as descending from the same **Proto-Indo-European** root) to the English word *realm* (via French *reaume* "kingdom" from Latin *regalis* "royal"). It is used for historical empires in general, such as the **Roman Empire** (*Römisches Reich*), **Persian Empire** (*Perserreich*), and both the **Tsardom of Russia** and the **Russian Empire** (*Zarenreich*, literally "Tsar realm").

In the **history of Germany** specifically, it is used to refer to:

- the early medieval Frankish Realm (**Francia**) and **Carolingian Empire** (the *Fränkisches Reich* and *Karolingerreich*);
- the **Holy Roman Empire** (*Heiliges Römisches Reich*), which lasted from the coronation of **Otto I** as **Holy Roman Emperor** in 962, until 1806, when it was dissolved during the **Napoleonic Wars**;
- the **German Empire** (*Deutsches Reich* or *Deutsches Kaiserreich*), which lasted from the unification of Germany in 1871 until its collapse after **World War I**, during the **German Revolution of 1918–1919**;
- the **Weimar Republic** of 1919–1933 continued to use *Deutsches Reich* as its official name;
- **Nazi Germany**, the **state** often referred to as the *Third Reich*, which lasted from the **Machtergreifung**

in 1933 until the **end of World War II** in Europe in 1945.

The historical *Reich* is commonly split into three periods:

1. **First Reich** (**German**: *Erstes Reich*): the **Holy Roman Empire** (**German**: *Heiliges Römisches Reich*), 962–1806, later the **Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation** (**German**: *Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*), also called the **Old Empire** (**German**: *Altes Reich*)
2. **Second Reich** (**German**: *Zweites Reich*): the **German Empire** (**German**: *Deutsches Kaiserreich*), 1871–1918
3. **Third Reich** (**German**: *Drittes Reich*): **Nazi Germany** (**German**: *Deutsches Reich*), 1933–1943, later the **Greater German Reich** (**German**: *Großdeutsches Reich*), 1943–1945

The **1918–1933 Weimar period**, which still used the official name of **German Reich**, is ignored and was denounced by the **Nazis** as a historical aberration, contemptuously referring to it as "the System".

In a 1923 book entitled *Das Dritte Reich* by **Arthur Moeller van den Bruck**,<sup>[3]</sup> the medieval **Holy Roman Empire** is counted as the first and the 1871–1918 monarchy as the second, which was then to be followed by a "reinvigorated" third *Reich*, i.e. **Nazi Germany**.

## 1 Etymology

The **Latin** equivalent of *Reich* is *imperium* or rather with a king *regnum*. Both terms translate to "rule, sovereignty, government", usually of **monarchs** (kings or emperors), but also of gods, and of the **Christian God**.<sup>[4]</sup> The German version of the **Lord's Prayer** uses the words *Dein Reich komme* for "ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου" (usually translated as "thy kingdom come" in English).<sup>[5]</sup> *Himmelreich* is the German term for the concept of "kingdom of heaven".

The German noun *Reich* is derived from Old High German *rīhi*, which together with its cognates in Old English *rīce* Old Norse *ríki* (modern Scandinavian *rike/rige*) and Gothic *reiki* is from a **Common Germanic** *\*rikijan*. The English noun is extinct, but persists in composition, in *bishopric*.

The German adjective *reich*, on the other hand, has an exact cognate in English *rich*. Both the noun (*\*rīkijan*) and the adjective (*\*rīkijaz*) are derivations based on a Common Germanic *\*rīks* “ruler, king”, reflected in Gothic as *reiks*, glossing ἄρχων “leader, ruler, chieftain”.

It is probable that the Germanic word was not inherited from pre-Proto-Germanic, but rather loaned from Celtic (i.e. Gaulish *rīx*) at an early time.<sup>[6]</sup>

The word has many cognates outside of Germanic and Celtic, notably Latin *rex* and Sanskrit *raja* “king”. It is ultimately from a Proto-Indo-European root *\*reg-*, meaning “to straighten out or rule”.

## 2 Usage throughout German history

### 2.1 Frankish Empire

*Frankenreich* or *Fränkisches Reich* is the German name given to the Frankish Kingdom of Charlemagne. *Frankenreich* came to be used of Western Francia and medieval France after the development of Eastern Francia into the Holy Roman Empire. The German name of France, *Frankreich*, is a contraction of *Frankenreich* used in reference to the kingdom of France from the late medieval period.<sup>[7]</sup>

### 2.2 Holy Roman Empire

See also: *Holy Roman Empire*

The term *Reich* was part of the German names for Germany for much of its history. *Reich* was used by itself in the common German variant of the *Holy Roman Empire*, (*Heiliges Römisches Reich (HRR)*). *Der rīche* was a title for the Emperor. However, Latin, not German, was the formal legal language of the medieval Empire (*Imperium Romanum Sacrum*), so English-speaking historians are more likely to use Latin *imperium* than German *Reich* as a term for this period of German history. The common contemporary Latin legal term used in documents of the Holy Roman Empire was for a long time *regnum* (“rule, domain, empire”, such as in *Regnum Francorum* for the Frankish Kingdom) before *imperium* was in fact adopted, the latter first attested in 1157, whereas the parallel use of *regnum* never fell out of use during the Middle Ages.

#### 2.2.1 Modern age

At the beginning of the modern age, some circles redubbed the HRR into the “Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation” (*Heiliges Römisches Reich Deutscher Nation*), a symptom of the formation of a German nation

state as opposed to the multinational state the Empire was throughout its history. Austria-Hungary and Prussia opposed this movement.

Resistance against the French revolution with its concept of the state brought a new movement to create a German “ethnic state”, especially after the Napoleonic wars. Ideal for this state was the Holy Roman Empire; the legend arose that Germany were “un-defeated when unified”, especially after the Franco-Prussian War (*Deutsch-Französischer Krieg*, lit. “German-French war”). Before that, the German question ruptured this “German unity” after the 1948 Revolution before it was achieved, however; Austria-Hungary as a multinational state could not become part of the new “German empire”, and nationality conflicts in Prussia with the Prussian Poles arose (“We can never be Germans – Prussians, every time!”).

The advent of national feeling and the movement to create an ethnically German Empire did lead directly to nationalism in 1871. Ethnic minorities declined since the beginning of the modern age; the Polabs, Sorbs and even the once important Low Germans had to assimilate themselves. This marked the transition between Antijudaism, where converted Jews were accepted as full citizens (in theory), to Antisemitism, where Jews were thought to be from a different ethnicity that could never become German. Apart from all those ethnic minorities being de facto extinct, even today the era of national feeling is taught in history in German schools as an important stepping-stone on the road to a German nation.

The term royal reich, or reich royale, was coined to describe a monarchy or royalty-backed network that characterizes many of the same attributes that Nazi Germany possessed, notably privilege of royal rank, repression and silencing of expression.

### 2.3 German Reich

See also: *German Reich*

In the case of the Hohenzollern Empire (1871–1918), the official name of the country was *Deutsches Reich* (“German Realm”), because under the Constitution of the German Empire, it was legally a confederation of German states under the permanent presidency of the King of Prussia. The constitution granted the King of Prussia the title of “German Emperor” (*Deutscher Kaiser*), but this referred to the German nation rather than directly to the “country” of Germany.<sup>[2]</sup>

The exact translation of the term “German Empire” would be *Deutsches Kaiserreich*. This name was sometimes used informally for Germany between 1871 and 1918, but it was disliked by the first German Emperor, Wilhelm I, and never became official.

The unified Germany which arose under Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1871 was the first entity that was of-

officially called in German *Deutsches Reich*, also the Second Reich (*Zweites Reich*) succeeding the Holy Roman Empire. *Deutsches Reich* remained the official name of Germany until 1945, although these years saw three very different political systems more commonly referred to in English as: “the German Empire” (1871–1918), the Weimar Republic (1919–1933; this term is a pre-World War II coinage not used at the time), and Nazi Germany (the Third Reich) (1933–1945).

## 2.4 During the Weimar Republic

After 1918 “Reich” was usually not translated as “Empire” in English-speaking countries, and the title was instead simply used in its original German. During the Weimar Republic the term *Reich* and the prefix *Reichs*-referred not to the idea of empire but rather to the institutions, officials, affairs etc. of the whole country as opposed to those of one of its constituent federal states (*Länder*), in the same way that the terms *Bund* (federation) and *Bundes*- (federal) are used in Germany today, and comparable to *The Crown* in Commonwealth countries and *The Union* in the United States.

## 2.5 During the Nazi period

The Nazis sought to legitimize their power historiographically by portraying their ascendancy to rule as the direct continuation of an ancient German past. They adopted the term *Drittes Reich* (“Third Empire” – usually rendered in English in the partial-translation “the Third Reich”), first used in a 1923 book entitled *Das Dritte Reich* by Arthur Moeller van den Bruck,<sup>[3]</sup> that counted the medieval Holy Roman Empire as the first and the 1871–1918 monarchy as the second, which was then to be followed by a “reinvigorated” third one. This ignored the previous 1918–1933 Weimar period, which the Nazis denounced as a historical aberration, contemptuously referring to it as “the System”. In the summer of 1939 the Nazis themselves actually banned the continued use of the term in the press, ordering it to use expressions such as *nationalsozialistisches Deutschland* (“National Socialist Germany”), *Großdeutsches Reich* (“Greater German Reich”), or simply *Deutsches Reich* (German Reich) to refer to the German state instead.<sup>[8]</sup> It was Adolf Hitler’s personal desire that *Großdeutsches Reich* and *nationalsozialistischer Staat* (“[the] National Socialist State”) would be used in place of *Drittes Reich*.<sup>[8]</sup> *Reichskanzlei Berchtesgaden* (“Reich Chancellery Berchtesgaden”), another nickname of the regime (named after the eponymous town located in the vicinity of Hitler’s mountain residence where he spent much of his time in office) was also banned at the same time, despite the fact that a sub-section of the Chancellery was in fact installed there to serve Hitler’s needs.<sup>[8]</sup>

Although the term “Third Reich” is still in common use to refer to this historical period, the terms “First Reich” and “Second Reich” for the earlier periods are seldom found outside Nazi propaganda. To use the terms “First Reich” and “Second Reich”, as some commentators did in the post-war years, is generally frowned upon as accepting Nazi historiography. During and following the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria in 1938 Nazi propaganda also used the political slogan *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* (“One people, one Reich, one leader”), in order to enforce pan-German sentiment. The term *Altes Reich* (“old Reich”; cf. French *ancien regime* for monarchical France) is sometimes used to refer to the Holy Roman Empire. The term *Altreich* was also used after the *Anschluss* to denote Germany with its pre-1938 post-World War I borders. Another name that was popular during this period was the term *Tausendjähriges Reich* (“Thousand-Year Reich”), the millennial connotations of which suggested that Nazi Germany would last for a thousand years.

The Nazis also spoke of enlarging the then-established Greater German Reich into a “Greater Germanic Reich of the German Nation” (*Großgermanisches Reich Deutscher Nation*) by gradually annexing all the historically Germanic countries and regions of Europe (Flanders, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden etc.) directly into the Nazi state.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 2.6 Possible negative connotations in modern use

A number of previously neutral words used by the Nazis have later taken on negative connotations in German (e.g. *Führer* or *Heil*); while in many contexts *Reich* is not one of them (*Frankreich*, France; *Römisches Reich*, Roman Empire), it can imply German imperialism or strong nationalism if it is used to describe a political or governmental entity. *Reich* has thus not been used in official terminology since 1945, though it is still found in the name of the Reichstag building, which since 1999 has housed the German federal parliament, the Bundestag. The decision not to rename the Reichstag building was taken only after long debate in the Bundestag; even then, it is described officially as *Reichstag – Sitz des Bundestages* (Reichstag, seat of the Bundestag). As seen in this example, the term “Bund” (federation) has replaced “Reich” in the names of various state institutions such as the army (“Bundeswehr”). The term “Reichstag” also remains in use in the German language as the term for the parliaments of some foreign monarchies, such as Sweden’s Riksdag and Japan’s pre-war Imperial Diet.

## 2.7 Limited usage in the railway system of the German Democratic Republic

The exception is that during the Cold War, the East German railway incongruously continued to use the name *Deutsche Reichsbahn* (German Reich Railways), which had been the name of the national railway during the Weimar Republic and the Nazi era. Even after German reunification in October 1990, the Reichsbahn continued to exist for over three years as the operator of the railroad in eastern Germany, ending finally on 1 January 1994 when the Reichsbahn and the western *Deutsche Bundesbahn* were merged to form the privatized *Deutsche Bahn AG*.

## 2.8 Names

Due to the importance of this word it is a popular conjunction in names. Many German names contain the word *reich* in modified forms. Such as *Dietrich*, *Heinrich*, *Friedrich*, *Richard*, and so on.

# 3 Usage in related languages

## 3.1 Rike, rige, riik

*Rike* is the Swedish and Norwegian word for "realm", in Danish spelled *rige*, of similar meaning as German *Reich*. The word is traditionally used for sovereign entities; a country with a King or Queen as *head of state*, such as the United Kingdom or Sweden itself, is a (*kunga*)*rike*, literally a "royal realm". Two regions in Norway that were petty kingdoms before the unification of Norway around 900 AD have retained the word in the names (see *Ringerike* and *Romerike*). *Riik* is an Estonian word for country and realm.

The word is used in "Svea rike", with the current spelling *Sverige*, the name of Sweden in Swedish. The derived prefix "riks-" implies nationwide or under central jurisdiction such as in *riksväg*, the Swedish name for a national road. It is also present in the names of institutions such as the *Riksdag*, *Sveriges Riksbank*, *Riksåklagaren*, *Rikspolisstyrelsen*, *Riksteatern*, *riksdaler*, etc. *Riksförbund* is used as a denomination by many national central organizations. *Rike* in Swedish is also used in *utrikes* (relating to foreign countries and other things from abroad) such as *Utrikesdepartementet* (Ministry for Foreign Affairs) and *utrikesnyheter* (news from abroad). The opposite of *utrikes* is *inrikes* (relating to the home country).

The Lord's Prayer uses the word in the Swedish, Norwegian and Danish versions: *Tillkomme ditt rike*, *Komme ditt rike*, *Komme dit rige* ('Thy kingdom come' – old versions). *Låt ditt rike komma!*, *La ditt rike komme*, *Komme dit rige* ('Let your kingdom come' – new versions).

"Rike" is also a now-archaic English word cognate with "reich".

## 3.2 Rijk/ryk

*Rijk* is the Dutch and *ryk* the Afrikaans equivalent of German *Reich*.

In a political sense in the Netherlands and Belgium the word *rijk* often connotes a connection with the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Belgium as opposed to the European part of the country or as opposed to provincial or municipal governments; the *ministerraad* is the executive body of the Netherlands' government and the *rijksministerraad* that of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a similar distinction is found in *wetten* (laws) versus *rijks-wetten* (kingdom laws), or the now-abolished *rijks-wacht* for gendarmerie in Belgium. The word *rijk* can also be found in institutions like *Rijkswaterstaat*, *Rijksinstituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu*, and *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*.

In Afrikaans, *ryk* refers to rulership and area of governance (mostly a kingdom), but in a modern sense the term is used in a much more figurative sense (e.g. *Die Hemelse Ryk* (the heavenly kingdom, China)), as the sphere under one's control or influence, such as:

- *die drie ryke van die natuur: die plante-, diere- en delfstowweryk* (the three kingdoms of nature: the plant, animal and mineral kingdom)
- *die duisendjarige ryk* (the thousand year realm, the Biblical millennium)
- *die ryk van die verbeelding, van drome* (the realm of the imagination, of dreams)
- *'n bestuurder wat sy ryk goed beheer* (a manager that controls his domain well)

Like in German, the adjective *rijk/ryk* means "rich".

## 4 See also

- Germany
- German Reich
- Imperium
- Reich (disambiguation)

## 5 References

- [1] <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/reich>
- [2] Harper's magazine, Volume 63. Pp. 593.

- [3] *The man who invented the Third Reich: the life and times of Arthur Moeller van den Bruck*. Npi Media Ltd. May 1, 1999. ISBN 978-0-75-091866-4.
- [4] see e.g. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, s.v. “Reich n.”
- [5] the Lord’s Prayer in Scandinavian also uses the cognate word; so it is in Old English – ‘Tobecyme thin rice’
- [6] Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, original suggestion from Karl Brugmann *grundriss der vergl. gramm.* 1, 65. Also mentioned in e.g. Calvert Watkins, *American Heritage dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, p. 70.
- [7] Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* cites Conrad of Megenberg (*fastn.* 140.14): *ich pin ein konig aus Frankreich*.
- [8] Schmitz-Berning, Cornelia (2000). *Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. KG, 10875 Berlin, pp. 159–160. (in German)
- [9] Elvert, Jürgen (1999) (in German). *Mitteleuropa!: deutsche Pläne zur europäischen Neuordnung (1918–1945)*, p. 325. Verlag Wiesbaden GmbH. ISBN 3-515-07641-7.



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